

# New Phone: A Fictional Case

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Paul dreaded this meeting. Marketing had called an all-hands conference to plan for the new smart phone launch. Paul had developed a 23-row matrix of features, functions and benefits. But for a minor usability feature, the forthcoming phone was the same as that offered by three competitors, all of whom had made it to market a month before. Marketing wanted a media splash. The company was in catch-up mode, and there was an air of desperation. Paul handled media relations and social media. He had already written mentally what the three leading trade journalists would say, and none of it was good. Bloggers would be less charitable.

Stan, the VP of marketing, was in the conference room and seated at the head of the U-shaped table. Even at rest, Stan was intense. He ran marathons, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. He would succeed even if it meant bending rules.

Stan, his head bent to a PowerPoint presentation on the table, said nothing to Paul. Standing behind Stan and on his cell phone was Jack, the advertising manager. Jack was a realist. He had indicated quietly to Paul that there wasn't much they could do but he had the agency working on messages. Susan entered behind Paul and sat down without greeting anyone. She handled direct and was planning a snail mail and HTML e-mail drop to registered users of the prior model. She estimated she could get a five percent upgrade with an affinity approach dividing users into five segments. She would test first with call center fulfillment. Sam, the webmaster, was late as usual. He had already sent redesigns of the home page to the group with dummy text. Paul thought "Lorem ipsum" about summed up the phone.

"Let's get this meeting started, shall we?" Stan's head tilted up and his black eyes scanned the room.

"Jack, comps?"

"Agency will be here tomorrow. 2pm. There will be three layouts on ease of use." Jack was matter of fact. Stan didn't intimidate him, even when Stan didn't like executions. Jack was a master of finding a way to satisfy management and the market at the same time. He had been in the industry for 20 years and learning the entire time.

"Susan?"

"Test in two weeks."

“Can’t you speed it up?”

“Choose the final comp tomorrow, and I still need six days. There’s no way I can speed that up. We’re dropping 10,000 in five variations.”

“Sam, good that you could join us.” Stan’s tone was acid. Sam showed no emotion, but sat down and placed his smart phone in front of him. He would keep an eye on it throughout the meeting and occasionally pick it up to peck a message.

“You have the proposed home page design. I’m waiting for copy.” Sam nodded toward Jack. It was clear that Sam felt he didn’t need to be in the meeting. There wasn’t much else he could do, and there were pressing issues.

“Have you put the journos under non-disclo?” Pete was staring at Paul who felt rising fear in his throat.

“Hamilton, Lloyd and Emerson saw the pre-production prototype yesterday. They won’t write until we tell them to.”

“What did they say?”

“Not much. Took a lot of notes and talked to Hill for an hour each.”

Marmon Hill was the lead engineer. He was blunt but a salesman. Paul felt that Hill had overhyped the features in the product, and the reporters weren’t buying it. He wasn’t going to tell that to Stan.

“What were they asking about?”

“We went over features, functions. Gave the usability demo. We told them we would have finals in their hands in 30 days for testing. They mostly focused on speed.”

“Why speed? That’s not what we want to emphasize.” Jack looked concerned.

“Because that is what the three competitors are spotlighting.” Paul told the truth. It wasn’t going to help him.

“Did you stress ease of use?” Stan’s eyes weren’t blinking.

“Marmon spent half of his time on it. I prepped him for an hour. He stressed key points at least three times in each meeting.”

“I don’t want to see articles comparing us against the other three on speed.” Stan’s tone was final.

“I’ll talk with them,” Paul said.

“Do more than that.”

Paul nodded and felt a wave of misery rising from his gut. Stan felt he could control what the media wrote about the company and its products, and he was furious with Paul when they didn’t. Paul was lucky in that he didn’t report to Stan. He would have been fired long ago, if he had. Still, Paul was on shaky ground. The CEO was counting on the phone to be successful. The company needed breathing room before the next model, which would be a breakthrough in speed and ease of use. Stan was feeling heat, which exacerbated his tendency to over-control.

“I want the press event.”

Paul’s heart sank. There wasn’t enough news in the phone to justify a press event. He would have to flog reporters and bloggers to come out and most wouldn’t write much when they did.

“Tell you what. Let’s try a stunt.”

“Like what?”

“We’ll go to Times Square and invite people to test their phones against this one in ease of use. We’ll give them three tasks to complete and let them see for themselves how easy it is.”

“Where’s the media in that?”

“We’ll hold a press session, have the thumb-drive kit available and phones for loaners.”

“Can you guarantee turnout.”

Of course, he couldn’t, and getting a display ready for a Times Square demo would be difficult along with permits.

“We’ll do the best we can.”

“Not good enough.”

“What we do in Times Square we can do in the top 20 metros. We’ll get local media that way.”

“Whose budget?”

It would have to be Stan's budget. Paul didn't have the money.

"We'll have to work that out."

"You need to come up with the money." Stan wasn't going to negotiate.

Paul's budget was only enough for a press event. He could spend that on Times Square and hope it was successful, but it was a risk. Foot traffic would not be enough to get the message out. If the media weren't interested, as he was certain they were not, a Times Square event was as much a waste as a press conference.

"Let me think about it."

"The time is past for thinking. You should be well into planning." Stan was angry, and the other three were staring at Paul.

"I am well into planning," Paul said weakly, "But it doesn't include a press event or stunt."

"I want plans for a press event in my e-mail tomorrow morning."

Should he confront him after the meeting and detail reasons why a press event made no sense? A suicide mission. He could resist and take the blame or go along and watch the event crash then take the blame. Jack was looking at him sympathetically. Susan was doodling, and Sam was sneaking glances at his phone.

"Let's discuss it later."

"I don't have time for discussion."

Paul sent an e-mail to Stan detailing reasons why a press event made no sense. Stan didn't respond. He carboned his boss for protection but that meant little. She stayed out of marketing and concerned herself with human resources.

So, they held a press event in a Marriott conference room on Times Square. In spite of Paul's best efforts, personal suasion and PR agency support in contacting media, 20 showed up in a room that could hold 50. The presentation was loaded with marketing speak that Paul had tried in vain to tone down. Marmon said the phone had no equal in the market, a blatant bit of puffery. The reporters and bloggers listened politely, two holding up tape recorders, three taking video, others tapping notes into their laptops and one or two with pencils and paper. Stan and Marmon were available for questions after the presentation. Paul saw a well-known blogger approaching Stan and sidled up to listen.

“The speed of this phone is no better than the competitors.”

Stan did his best to hide his annoyance.

“The key to this phone is ease of use. No one makes a phone that is easier to use.”

“Will the next model be faster?”

“Speed is not the issue. Everyone has the same speed. The key is usability. You don’t have to fumble with this phone to call up the internet or take a photo.”

The blogger got the message. He chitchatted with Stan for a minute or two then walked to the table to sign out a phone for a test drive.

Paul stayed close to Stan whose looks were dark. The next person to come to him was a reporter for a major daily with a circulation nearing a million. His first question was about speed. Stan was testy and repeated what he said to the blogger.

“Isn’t it true, however, that whoever reaches the next level of speed is going to have the advantage?”

“No. It is whoever makes the phone easiest to use.”

The reporter looked doubtful but took notes. He didn’t sign out a phone for test.

So it went for an hour and a half. Paul’s fears were confirmed, and he could predict the stories, the first of which were Tweeted during the conference. No one in the media was excited but they reported the claim of ease of use, noted parity in speed and were noncommittal – just the facts. Their judgments would come from using the phone.

Stan was angry when the event was over. He called the media “shitheads,” and he left quickly for a plane back to headquarters. Marmon was calmer.

“What do we need to do to educate these people?”

“Marmon, you know better. The competitors have been flogging speed for the last three months. They trained the press.”

“Let’s see what they write.”

Paul collected stories for two weeks. The first spate of demo stories came out four days after the conference. While the stories mentioned ease of use, they

were lukewarm. The tenor was that this phone was a marginal improvement to what was out there already. One blogger summed it well:

“If you are in the market for an upgrade, consider this phone as an option. If not, wait for the next generation that will come in 12 months or so.”

Stan threw the story across the desk at him.

“This is shit.”

Paul knew better than to argue.

“We could still go back to a stunt in the Top 20.”

“We need something.”

“Let me plan it, but I’ll need your budget.”

“We’ll discuss it.”

Paul left Stan’s office with a light step and a smile that he was careful not to let Stan see.

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Questions for discussion:

1. If PR reported directly to the CEO, would Paul have had an easier time holding off Stan?
2. Should Paul have confronted Stan in any event?
3. Did Paul’s win in the end teach Stan to trust him more, or will Paul suffer the same conflict during the next product introduction?
4. What should Paul do to teach Stan more about media relations or is Stan beyond reach?
5. What would you have done in this instance?